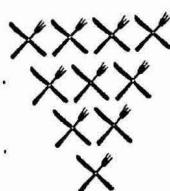


knife & fork

The Insider's Guide to Atlanta Restaurants



Creature Comforts



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Atlas ★★★XXX

88 W. Paces Ferry Rd.
Dinner Sun-Thu 5:30-10;
Fri & Sat 5:30-11
Reservations accepted (404-600-6471)
Credit cards: AE, V, MC, DC, Dis \$\$\$

Unlike the new wave of establishments where maximum inconvenience to the customer is a badge of honor and young chefs overload the menu with rich proteins and fat, the just-opened **Atlas**, adjacent to the St. Regis Atlanta hotel, woos diners with delightful service, convenience, and a cuisine featuring more seafood than meat.

Christopher Grossman, who was consultant chef Gerry Klaskala's chef de cuisine for years at **Aria**, recently worked at **The French Laundry**, and his visually arresting dishes based on fresh-sourced or housemade ingredients are anything but generic. Dining at **Atlas** is considerably less stuffy than you might expect from the location. The staff wears gingham shirts. The kitchen is completely open. And the floor plan, including a small bar, a sexy little lounge with a fireplace, and comfortable vaulted alcoves with a treasure of twentieth-century art, creates a feeling of timeless intimacy. The fairly small paintings and etchings, chosen because they are important rather than pretty, hang close together, salon-style, as they would in the private quarters of a debonair collector.

The dining room is intensely comfortable, with plenty of rich fabrics to caress the eye and well-spaced seating on soft banquets. The general manager, Jason Babb, is good humored and vigilant in a way we thought was lost in Atlanta, and his staff is equally pleasant. Since you are in a hotel, you may encounter characters of all ilk, including loudmouths who colonize the bar.

Bring an appetite for the housemade breads served at the beginning of the meal with a hand-formed slab of good butter topped with crystals of salt. If you aren't a passionate consumer of carbs, formal bread service may be nothing to you, but to us, the splendid buckwheat bread and its fine crust, the dainty little flat brioches, and the correct, mild gougeres mean the world.

There is nothing wrong with the list of careful cocktails mixed at **Atlas**, but we found ours, a Pompadour made with Clement rhum agricole, Pineau des Charentes, and lemon, lacking in mystery. On the other hand, the wine list is spellbinding, with selections such as a René Geoffroy brut pink champagne Rosé de Saignée premier cru (available by the half bottle) of a brilliant, almost-red hue or a mineral golden yellow St. Aubin geographically and stylishly close to the Chassagne- and Puligny-Montrachet terroirs.

As an appetizer, we can't imagine anything better than the lightly cured hiramasa

kingfish or amberjack on a transparent, slightly thickened grapefruit consommé with a lovely landscape of fresh hearts of palm, tiny citrus fruit, mint, chili peppers, cilantro, pearl onions, citrus, and mint. Do not snicker "how young can they be?" when you order Vonnies Young Sprouts, an exquisite composition of Georgia-grown radish and sunflower sprouts, pea shoots, and toasted sunflower seeds surrounded by a charming moat of soft housemade buttermilk ricotta and a pale-green dill sauce. The truffled potato pierogis made with slow-braised Wagyu beef contain fun little crisps of Parmesan and herb-roasted mushrooms but remain light and puffy.

If you have been pining for dishes such as venison or rabbit, you will find plenty to love about Chef Grossman's restrained presentations. Neither the first (a pecan-grilled Cervina tenderloin paired with a wonderful barley porridge, charred brussels sprout leaves, roasted parsnip, cipollini, and a touch of plum cherry purée) nor the second (a confit leg, its meat pulled and combined with thinner-than-thin pappardelle in a delicate saffron sauce) is anywhere near over-the-top.

Hot smoked halibut with Picholine olives, citrus, artichokes, and charred broccolini and steelhead trout from the Olympic Peninsula with braised swiss chard, flageolet beans, black trumpet mushrooms, and fetching cones of squid ink pasta are equally masterful. The menu varies, and the mild tilefish on quinoa with chickpeas, puffed rice, bok choy, and Meyer lemon purée may turn into a black grouper, but you shouldn't worry.

Because the food is light, you will probably have a healthy appetite for a delicious, pure-white coconut and almond milk panna cotta with citrus and papaya coulis or a whimsical deconstructed passion fruit tart with crisp meringues, soft cream, and caramelized pineapple. Make a note: this is where you want to take a special guest ■

UPDATE

Watershed on Peachtree ★★½

1820 Peachtree Rd. 404-809-3561



Reviewed May '12, rated ★★★★

The hiring of Chef Zeb Stevenson, known through his work at **Livingston**, **Proof and Provision**, and, more recently, the reboot of **Parish** in Inman Park, is a great opportunity for a once stellar restaurant to turn back the clock and restore the faith of many fans who griped about the move from Decatur to South-Buckhead and never quite adjusted to the fancy changes in the kitchen.

The original chef, the brilliant Scott Peacock (who moved to Alabama), and his previous acolytes, Billy Allin and Stephen Satterfield, who now run two of the best restaurants in Atlanta, knew exactly how to cook southern food without histrionics. When Joe Truex took over, he introduced a Cajun fine-dining sensibility and took into account the excellent wine list when shaping a menu many found too expensive. His departure for Dubai has created an opportunity for **Watershed** to reconsider its trajectory and recapture the magic and the modesty.

The best dish we have had so far on the new roster is the appetizer of Appalachian cider beans resembling a small cassoulet with a slow-cooked egg and "chicken-fried" bread crumbs, a creation we feel could have come out of one of Sean Brock's kitchens. We are pretty much in love with the smoked trout brandade, too, enchantingly mild and presented in the style of a delicate shepherd's pie in a small oven-proof dish.

We have perhaps had crisper pork skins than the ones offered by Stevenson on his snack menu, but none as smooth and puffy, displaying a brilliant golden gloss and a dusting of barbecue spices. Dip them into the chef's own legacy hot sauce and your